DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 546 UD 035 724

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TITLE	Latino 6th Grade Student Perceptions of School Sorting Practices.
SPONS AGENCY	Kelloqg Foundation, Battle Creek, MI.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	44p.; Additional support from California University, Center for Chicano Studies. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Ability Grouping; *Academic Achievement; Elementary Education; Grade 6; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Hispanic American Students; Limited English Speaking ; Student Attitudes; *Track System (Education)
IDENTIFIERS	*Latinos

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the instructional grouping practices utilized by teachers in two sixth grade classrooms in a southern California elementary school, noting how Hispanic American students in the classrooms perceived those grouping practices and how perceptions of grouping practices compared across Latino students in different ability groups. Researchers conducted case analyses of four students, using in-depth ethnographic interviews to capture students' accounts of their academic experiences during sixth grade. Researchers also interviewed two sixth grade teachers about their organization of student instruction, placement criteria, student curricular placements, and perceptions of student experiences with grouping. Finally, the researchers collected data on student Stanford 9 test scores, nationality, English language learner status, socioeconomic status, and parent educational background and employment. Results indicated that although ability grouping may be deemed useful for instruction by educators, students' perceptions of such practices may form an often disadvantageous perspective that can impact their sense of self. This perspective may more negatively affect students with limited English proficiency. Both high and low ability placed students operated under the assumption that student performance in high ability classrooms needed to meet more demanding standards and self-accountability than in low ability classrooms. An appendix presents student demographic and placement characteristics. (SM)

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ED 477 546

Latino 6th Grade Student Perceptions of School Sorting Practices

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Paper presented at the 2003 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.

April 22, 2003

This research was supported by a grant from the Center for Chicano Studies, UC Santa Barbara, California. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation supported the implementation of the ENLACE y Avance project yielding data for this paper. The findings and opinions expressed in the paper solely reflect the authors and do not represent the views of our sponsors. We express our genuine gratitude to the students, teachers, staff and administrators at the school in which this research was conducted.

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Introduction

In response to the consistent educational underachievement of Latino students, there is increasing national concern about how to best educate this student population. At present, researchers continue to investigate issues related to the ways in which Latinos move through the educational system and into the workforce. The advancement of students of color, particularly Latinos, in the various academic pathways leading to higher education, winnows as students navigate their way through primary and secondary school, and is evidenced by alarming dropout rates prior to high school completion (Durán, 1994; Gandara, 2001). For example, among young adults, ages 18-24, the high school graduation rate nationwide reached 92 percent for White Non-Hispanics and 84 percent for Blacks. For Hispanic students, the rate was far lower at 64 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Latino eligibility rates for admission to higher education institutions follow a similar disconcerting trend. For example, in California, Latino students will constitute 37 percent of graduating seniors by the year 2010, yet at present less than 4 percent of those graduates are eligible for admission to the University of California (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Alvarez, 2001).

The achievement context for Latinos is of increasing interest for educators and policy makers in response to national concern for school accountability, state and school district's educational reform initiatives to implement standards based instruction, and implementation of high school exit examinations. In the state of California, the academic performance index (API) serves as the basis for statewide accountability for public schools. In 2001, the API was a combination of scores derived from the Stanford 9,

Ninth Edition, a norm referenced test of student achievement in reading, math, language, and spelling and the California Standards Test, based on students' skills and knowledge required by the California content standards in reading and mathematics for each grade level (STAR Standardized Testing and Reporting Program, 2001). The API is utilized by the state to monitor each school and school district's performance annually against academic growth targets for demographically similar schools throughout the state. Schools and teachers are required to provide instruction that is driven by the state standards and that strives to meet their API growth targets.

This plan for improving students' outcomes assumes that standards based instruction can indeed be provided by teachers and that this instruction will be effective for all students, including Latino students. We know from research however, particularly research on Latino English language learners (Gutierrez, 2003) that students' opportunity to benefit from instruction requires a deeper understanding of how to build on the sociocultural and linguistic capital that students bring to the classroom.

As an alternative, some schools and teachers organize instruction through homogenous grouping of students according to judged ability and previous achievement, working under the assumption that if instruction is organized in this way, teachers will be better equipped to meet the individual needs of students. However, little is known about how students interpret these informal tracking practices and how these perceptions are associated with students' perceptions of themselves as learners in academic contexts. In response to this lack of knowledge, this study explores: 1) the instructional grouping practices utilized by teachers in two 6th grade classrooms in an elementary school in the

southern California area; 2) how Latino students in these classrooms perceived these instructional grouping practices; and 3) how perceptions of grouping practices compared across Latino students in different ability groups.

Contextualizing the Study

The present project is informed by an interdisciplinary approach to the study of students' development of a sense of self in academic contexts through theories of ability grouping and tracking (Oakes, 1985; Braddock and Slavin, 1992), sociocultural approaches to learning in situated contexts, (Moll, Estrada, Diaz & Lopez, 1997) and theories of self regulated learning (Garcia and Pintrich, 1994; McCaslin and Hickey, 2001; Rieber, 1998; Durán, in preparation). Together these perspectives provide key theoretical constructs that inform our research by guiding our questions, methods and analyses.

Ability Grouping Research

Ability grouping of students is a long-standing and controversial issue in elementary school, as well as in high school where tracking by ability grouping takes the form of an institutionalized practice associated with post high school availability for the work force vs. higher education opportunities (Harklau, 1994). Many research studies have examined how students identified as high vs. low ability in a subject matter area perform when they are grouped heterogeneously (groups consist of a mixture of high and low ability students) or homogeneously (groups consist only of students at the same high or low ability level) (Dawson, 1987). (Some studies also involve students classified as middle ability.)

Prominent issues that have been investigated are tied to confirming or disconfirming common sense beliefs underlying teachers' rationale for ability grouping. Examples include: 1) Is the learning of high ability students held back when they are placed in mixed or heterogeneous ability groups?; 2) Are low ability student's deficiencies more easily remediated if they are placed in homogenous ability classes?; 3) Do low ability students develop more positive attitudes about themselves and school when they are placed in homogeneous ability groups heterogeneous ability groups?; 4) Do placement processes used to separate students into ability groups both accurately and fairly reflect students past achievement and native abilities?; 5) Is it easier for teachers to accommodate student's individual differences in homogenous ability groups? (Oakes, 1985).

Despite wide acceptance of the rationales for ability group by many educators, empirical studies have failed to find clear positive evidence of effects of homogeneous ability grouping on achievement (Braddock and Slavin, 1992). Furthermore, research suggests that students in low ability tracks perform significantly less well than do similar low achieving students in heterogeneous ability classrooms on composite and course subject achievement tests (Braddock and Slavin, 1992). What's more, studies show that students in low ability groups are exposed to less content material and to lower quality instruction than are students in middle or high ability groups or other low achieving students in mixed ability classes (Braddock and Slavin, 1992; Oakes, 1982).

Other research focusing specifically on Latino students provide little evidence that students benefit from ability grouping. Historical analyses show that schools have

followed the unwritten tradition of tracking Mexican children into vocational and slow learner classes (Valencia, 2002). Research investigating the effects of differential curriculum on Latinos and African American students suggests that tracking has negatively impacted these groups of students by denying them equal educational opportunity. In particular, Latinos and other students of color have been disproportionately excluded from acquiring "high status" knowledge, the knowledge deemed to be a prerequisite for college admission and academic success in higher education (Valencia, 2002). Noguera (1995) in fact argues that racial bias influences ability grouping practices and as a result, Latino students are disproportionately concentrated in low ability classes. Research also indicates that Latino students, who are second language learners, tend to be over represented in low ability classes (Harklau, 1994).

Sociocultural Approaches to Learning

The foregoing findings on ability grouping and student achievement are useful for partially contextualizing our research. We benefit further by drawing on sociocultural theory and research. We use this approach to interpret how Latino students might view learning and instruction, and identity as learners in high versus low ability tracked classrooms. A sociocultural approach allows us to foreground students' beliefs about how ability grouping affects their display of their academic competence given the way instruction is organized both socially and academically. We can explore students' beliefs about the effectiveness of grouping practices in providing them with an opportunity to learn critical subject matter and beliefs about ways that such practices affect students'

sense of identity as competent learners. Previous research on differential opportunity to learn in remedial vs. high expectation classrooms from a sociocultural perspective provides us with some important insights.

Moll, Diaz, Lopes and Estrada (1997), e.g., studied how instructional goals and student work were organized in a bilingual program broken into two language arts classroom tracks serving Latino elementary students in the same school. One classroom, that we deem "low ability" for the purposes of this paper, focused on developing students' basic English proficiency. The second classroom (the "high ability" classroom) focused on students' pursuit of reading comprehension assignments in Spanish. The results of ethnographic research in the "low ability" classroom showed that teachers' structuring of English lessons was based on their belief that students' English decoding and pronunciation capabilities needed development, with little concern for student's comprehension skill development. In contrast, ethnographic research in the second "high ability" classroom showed that the teacher concentrated on developing children's reading comprehension skills in Spanish. The teacher in the second classroom had much higher and cognitively demanding expectations of students. In contrast to the first classroom where the teacher concentrated on developing low-level, basic skills in English, the teacher in the second classroom asked students to demonstrate their comprehension by e.g., writing book reports. This investigation of situating learning in ability groups helps us to understand how teacher's expectations of students in ability groups influence the type of learning opportunities afforded to students thereby, limiting or enhancing how they demonstrate competence in the classroom.

Self Regulation and Academic Work

In a related manner, we were also concerned with understanding how students' beliefs about their ability grouping experiences yielded information about how they monitor and self-regulate their academic work and self-identity as competent students and learners, modifies what students already know and are able to do in light of the demands situated in their social interactions (Durán and Szymanski, 1995, pp. 150). According to Garcia and Pintrich (1994), there are two general domains in the classroom, motivational and cognitive, which are related to different types of achievement outcomes. Within each of these two domains, there are two general organizing constructs, knowledge/beliefs and strategies. Knowledge refers to student's declarative knowledge about actual content of the tasks, their knowledge and beliefs about classroom tasks and the classroom context, as well as their knowledge about themselves (Garcia and Pintrich, 1994). Besides knowledge, students use a variety of cognitive, motivational, and self-regulatory strategies to accomplish classroom academic tasks (Garcia and Pintrich, 1994). These strategies refer to the cognitive processes and behaviors that students utilize to accomplish self-set goals within the social milieu of classrooms. In other words, students need to self-regulate their action in order to accomplish specific tasks in a quality manner. They must learn that they can choose how and with what intensity to apply themselves and that their decisions consequently affect their academic performance. Furthermore, in order to be a successful student, an individual must pay attention to what's going on, what they think is expected of them or what they think they can do.

Students must also know when they have finished a task and they must evaluate what they have completed (McCaslin and Hickey, 2001).

How students apply themselves to their work, what they view is expected of them, and how they monitor how well they are doing their work is not just an intrapsychological phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. At the social level, the teacher evaluates students, which is one way individuals learns to self regulate themselves in a situated context. Self regulation also occurs at the group level in terms of the way students orient to class work collectively and the way they interact with their peers as they do their individual work.

Based on this line of thought, we infer that students develop cultural models for learning engagement and performance in academic contexts. At a general institutional level students infer a cultural model for how schools operate and for how they socially and self-regulate their participation as students at school. Within the specific contexts of a given classroom, students also develop a cultural model for how the classroom operates and for how they as individual and social members of the classroom interact and carry out classroom practices. In order to "be a student", each individual member of a school and classroom must continuously negotiate their identity within the boundaries of the cultural models they infer. Students' perceptions of their academic competency play an important part of this negotiation of school and classroom participation.

But what happens to students who maintain cultural models that position them as being of low vs. high ability and vice versa? The notion of meritocracy is a belief that students develop that guides their ideas about how schools should operate and how

academic success can be obtained. U.S. education has historically operated from a reward system that separates successful students, based on the quality of their work, from school failures that are unable to display academic competence in the same manner. School sorting practices, which create differential socialization experiences for students, maintains meritocracy in school contexts. According to Oakes (1982), she utilizes Bowles and Gintis notions of meritocracy within the school context to explain how schools differentially educate students and replicate existing and future social class structures. Based on this line of thought, we infer that students develop cultural models for learning engagement and performance in academic contexts that help in creating their sense of self.

The Current Study

It is the aim of the present program of work to explore how Latino students' perceptions of ability grouping influence their sense of self in an academic context for a sample of sixth grade students. We hope that through this work and by exploring the experiences of Latino students as they move through academic pathways, we can better support their academic progress at its various transition points.

We attempt to conceptualize and address how students appropriate cultural beliefs about the world and how they can function competently in activity settings that constitute the lived experiences of particular communities of practices (i.e. school and classroom). We work from a perspective which recognizes that understanding how students might become more active agents and thinkers in a learning community, requires notions of achievement that acknowledge the pathways and resources that help build students' self-

identity and social identity as sense-makers in academic activities (Durán, Escobar, Wakin, 1997, pp. 42).

Information about the organization of classroom instruction gathered from teacher interviews gave us an idea of the instructional grouping practices, which were implemented in the classrooms we studied. It was important for our line of work however, to more closely examine student perceptions of teacher's instructional grouping practices in order to understand how students developed a sense of self in an academic setting. Our findings focus on students' perceptions of between class grouping, their perceptions about the criteria that were used to place students in ability groups as well as their perceptions of the curriculum that was offered to them in their language arts and math ability groups. Furthermore, we explore the meaningful characteristics students used to describe their language arts and math classes in order to capture how our student sample perceived other students who were in their own ability groups as well as those who had a different group assignment.

To guide our analysis, we utilized the following research questions: a) what are the instructional grouping practices utilized by teachers in two sixth grade classrooms; b) how do students perceive these instructional grouping practices; and c) how do these perceptions of grouping practices compare across students? We anticipate that the aforementioned questions will help inform how students develop a sense of self in an academic context.

Method

Setting: Community and School Characteristics

Our data is derived from ENLACE, Engaging Latino Communities for Education Partnership, one of thirteen national collaboratives that comprise a $28 million dollar initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The goal of this initiative is to strengthen academic pathways and increase opportunities for Latino youth to enter and successfully complete college. One of ENLACE's objectives is to identify strategies to overcome policy obstacles to educational progress such as access to higher education for Latino students affected by prior educational progress and educational tracking at various points along the K-16 educational pathway.

Our respondents were residents of the community of Puerto del Mar[1], which is one of the most densely populated areas in the western United States. The quality of life in Puerto del Mar presents numerous challenges for families and youth. Adequate housing is a primary concern for all residents in this community. Most (95%) of the residents in Puerto del Mar are renters (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). For Latino families, often their rents are more then one adult or family can afford, so the presence of other income earners in the same home (i.e. other adults and families) is critical to their economic survival. Another challenge is that Puerto del Mar is isolated geographically, and bus fares are costly for low-income families. Local junior high and high school students who rely on bus transportation to school pay $30 per month to get from home to

[1] Puerto del Mar is a pseudonym created to keep the community where our research was conducted unidentifiable.

school (Segura, 1999). Geographic isolation and limited transportation constrains the opportunities of Puerto del Mar youth to participate in diverse recreation and other programs in the larger community (Segura, 1999).

Magdalena Elementary,[2] which is a primary school in Puerto del Mar, ranked among the very lowest achieving schools in the surrounding district on the State Academic Performance Index in 2001-a decile rank of "2" on a scale from "1" to "10" (California Department of Education, 2002). The annual income for the majority of Latino families in Puerto del Mar is low. Seventy five percent of students attending Magdalena Elementary were eligible for free or reduced price lunch (California Department of Education, 2002). Seventy percent of students were classified as English language learners and sixty-nine percent of students were from Latino backgrounds (California Department of Education, 2002).

Latino resident educational profiles resemble those of Mexican immigrants nationwide. That is, they report primary or elementary school education in their countries of origin as the years of school they completed (Segura, 1999). Latino parents at this school had less education than is typical in the surrounding school district area. About forty-three percent of Magdalena Elementary students had no parent who completed high school, compared to other schools in the district with significant Latino student populations where 16% percent of students had no parent who had completed high school (California Department of Education, 2001).

Sample

[2] Magdalena Elementary is a pseudonym created to keep the name of the school where our student sample was obtained confidential.

In order to explore our interests intensively, we conducted case analyses of four ENLACE students, two of which were female and two of which were male. Our case study student sample was selected purposefully from a cohort of forty ENLACE students, using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990). Student cases were selected according to their gender as well as their language arts and math curricular placements in two sixth grade classrooms. These classrooms merged together for instruction to form a high and low ability class for both language arts and math. By using this sampling strategy, we benefited from: 1) high-quality, detailed descriptions of each student case, which were useful for documenting uniqueness, and 2) important shared patterns that cut across student cases and derived their significance from having emerged out of variance (Patton, 1990).

The four selected students had the following distribution of curricular placements: Gladys (high language arts/ high math); Noel (high language arts/low math); Jesus (low language arts/high math); and Carola (low language arts/low math)[3][4]. Gladys had the highest curricular placement of the four students. She was a Mexican immigrant student who had been at Magdalena Elementary for 3 years. Gladys had moved back and fourth between Mexico and the United States from a very early age; she had completed kindergarten and first grade in the U.S., had returned to Mexico for second and third grade, and then returned to the U.S in fourth grade. In Mexico, Gladys' father had completed a high school education and began a university degree; however he did not complete it. Her mother had completed through her junior year of high school in Mexico.

[3] Our case study student sample was given pseudonyms to protect their identities.
[4] See Appendix: Demographic and Placement Characteristics of ENLACE Students for summary of student demographic information.

Gladys' father was a cook in a local restaurant and the families' sole breadwinner, while her mother was the primary caretaker of their two children. Gladys qualified for free lunch at Magdalena Elementary and was classified as an early advanced English learner[5] at the time of this study. Her Stanford 9 national percentile scores were the following at the end of 5th grade: 44 in reading, 78 in math, 69 in language, and 19 in spelling.

Noel was a student in the high ability language arts and the low ability math class. He was U.S. born of Mexican descent and had been at Magdalena Elementary for 4th, 5th and 6th grade. Noel was a student who had attended two elementary school districts since he was in kindergarten. He had previously attended another elementary school in the district for kindergarten through third grade, with the exception of a three-month period, when he moved to another city out of the district. In Mexico, Noel's mother completed elementary school and his father completed high school. At the time of this study, his father was employed as a gardener, while his mother was the primary caretaker of their three children. Nestor qualified for free lunch at Magdalena Elementary and was classified as an early intermediate English leaner. His Stanford 9 national percentile scores were the following at the end of 5th grade: 36 in reading, 42 in math, 11 in language, and 33 in spelling.

Jesus was a student in the low ability language arts class and the high ability math class. He was U.S. born of Mexican descent. He had been at Magdalena Elementary since kindergarten. Jesus' mother and father had obtained an elementary school education in Mexico. His mother was employed as a housekeeper and his father as a

[5] These English language classifications were obtained from Magdalena Elementary. They range from: beginning; early intermediate; intermediate; early advanced; advanced; initially fluent in English; and redesignated fluent in English.

gardener. Jesus qualified for free lunch at Magdalena Elementary and was classified as an intermediate English learner at the time of this study. His Stanford 9 national percentile scores were the following at the end of 5th grade: 8 in reading, 12 in math, 9 in language, and 11 in spelling.

Carola had the lowest curricular placement of the four students; she was in the low language arts class and the low math class. She was U.S. born of Mexican descent. She had attended Magdalena Elementary since kindergarten. In Mexico, her mother had obtained a 5th grade education and her father had a 6th grade education. Her father was employed as a gardener, while her mother was the primary caretaker for their only child who remained at home. Cynthia qualified for free lunch and was classified as an early intermediate English learner at the time of this study. Her Stanford 9 national percentile scores were the following at the end of 5th grade: 4 in reading, 4 in math, 11 in language, and 1 in spelling.

Data Sources or Evidence

For this study we conducted in depth, ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979, 1980) of ENLACE students to capture accounts of their academic experiences during their sixth grade school year. As we conducted a qualitative content analysis of prominent themes emerging from the interviews of our cohort of forty ENLACE students; we consistently found that student's showed concern about their ability grouping. Their thoughts about curricular placements were a principal theme in their interviews. In order to explore this ability grouping theme more intensively, we conducted a more detailed analysis of four ENLACE students.

The second round of interviews were more in depth; semi structured, and drew from an ethnographic perspective which allowed us to capture how students voiced their thoughts about their placements and experiences in certain ability groups in order to understand how they formed a sense of self during their sixth grade school year (Heyl, 2001). This second round of student interview data was subjected to a coding process of meaning categorization that explored for specific dimensions, which were themselves, differentiated into subcategories. These sub categories corresponded to content that emerged from the collected data and reviews of literature dealing with the development of sense of self in academic contexts as well as student experiences with ability grouping practices (Kvale, 1996). This categorization also made it possible to investigate similarities and differences in responses relative to student curricular placement (Kvale, 1996).

In addition, two of the sixth grade teachers participated in an in depth, semi structured interview about their organization of student instruction for language arts and math, placement criteria, student curricular placements as well as their perceptions of student experiences with classroom grouping practices[6]. Teacher interview data was also subjected to a coding process of meaning categorization that explored for specific dimensions which were themselves differentiated into subcategories and corresponded to content that emerged from the collected data and reviews of literature dealing with ability grouping practices (Kvale, 1996).

Part of our research also involved gathering various other sources of data such as student Stanford 9 test scores, student nationality, English language learner and

[6] The 6th grade teachers in this study were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

socioeconomic status as well as parent educational background and employment. We then subjected all of this data to a multi-step analysis where we attempted to triangulate all of the evidence to understand how students perceived ability grouping practices and how perceptions of grouping practices compared across students based on their individual experiences (Patton, 1990).

Results

Findings on Teacher's Perceptions Regarding Student Grouping

In interviewing the sixth grade teachers, we learned that they organized instruction for language arts and math by using between class grouping. Students in both teachers' classes were assigned to either a high or low language arts and math group. Teachers informed us that they distributed instructional responsibilities by teaching a high and low section in each subject area. Therefore, one of the teachers taught a high section of language arts and a low section of math, while the other teacher taught a low section of language arts and a high section of math.

Teachers also explained the criteria they used for placing students in these ability groups. For language arts, both teachers administered the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI), a test adapted from McMillan-McGraw Hill textbook for the 6th grade by Magdalena Elementary's principal and reading specialist. The IRI was administered at the beginning of the year to gauge students' vocabulary and reading comprehension skills so that their reading grade level could be determined. To supplement these IRI scores, teachers also administered and interpreted student writing samples, which were administered at the beginning of the school year, to give them an indication of student

writing capabilities (i.e. student introduction letter to teacher). To our surprise both teachers stated the Stanford 9 test scores and students' grades from the previous year were not heavily relied upon to determine student's placement in these ability groups. Instead, they relied on internal documentation, only available to teachers that specified student's previous placement as well as their previous teacher's recommendation. Student's individual IRI scores and writing samples were then used as a point of reference from which to compare their performance from the previous academic year. They used all of this information to "level" students from both classes and assign them to an ability group. Students in the low ability class were assessed to read anywhere from beginning English language instruction to about a third grade level. Students in this class were designated anywhere from beginning to early advanced English language learners. In the high ability class, students were assessed to read anywhere from a fourth grade level and beyond. Students in this class were designated anywhere from early advanced to fluent English speakers.

In math, both teachers administered an inventory examination at the beginning of the school year that was taken from their adopted textbook. It was designed to assess the math skills students had acquired through their fifth grade year and it focused on student competence with computational skills. Teachers also reported looking at student's math placement from the previous year as well as the 5th grade teacher's recommendation. However, in assigning students to an ability group, teachers relied more heavily on students' math inventory test percentile rank. Those students that scored low on the test were assigned to the low ability class, while students who scored high on the test were

assigned to the high ability class. Teachers used their discretion to interpret student's percentile scores in order to place them in the appropriate ability class.

Teachers explained their rationale for utilizing between class grouping to organize instruction for language arts and for math by stating that ability grouping allowed them to "better meet student needs". In language arts in particular, teachers mentioned that as students go up in the grade level, the discrepancy in their reading abilities and what is required of them increases. By the sixth grade, students can read anywhere between a kindergarten and high school level. Teachers also mentioned that between class grouping allowed them to focus their instruction on a "particular set of needs" since reducing the variability of student's ability levels made it easier for them to adjust assignments accordingly. For example in math, teachers reported that instruction was difficult to provide to English language learners because their language comprehension abilities affected how well they could do higher skilled math problems that did not require the sole use of computational skills (i.e. word problems).

Teachers explained how class work differed for the high and low language arts classes, although they were required to teach students according to the standardized curriculum for the sixth grade. For example, they mentioned that curriculum was similar across both language arts classes; students read the same stories and did the same writing projects such as narratives or persuasive essays. The emphases of each class differed however. For example, while the high language arts class did more critical analysis and worked with literary techniques like foreshadowing and hyperboles, the low language arts utilized less abstract techniques like the mood of a story. Teachers reported that they

"adjusted assignments" from the required materials for the sixth grade, according to student ability. They noted that there was a slight difference between the high and low language arts classes, although they were supposed to be instructed with the same curriculum. For instance, if a biography was required, all students would complete a biography, only the end product would differ for both classes.

Curriculum in the high and low classes in math also differed. Teachers reported that different textbooks were utilized for the high and low classes in math. The high class used a textbook by Glencoe, a 5th-12th grade book, which teachers thought was too difficult for second language learners to understand because it was more language based. Therefore, they made the decision to use another 6th grade textbook adopted by the district, the Scott Foresman program, in the low ability class. According to the teachers, this textbook was much easier for second language learners to understand. It didn't however, provide as much of a challenge for high-end students as did the Glenco text, which incorporated challenge based problems. Teachers noted that they taught students the same standards, however because the textbooks used by the high and low ability classes were organized differently, both groups of students did not cover the same math content at the same time. Teachers also mentioned that because students in the high ability class had already mastered basic computational skills, it offered them more time to do more enrichment activities. Students, who were in the low ability class on the other hand, devoted most of their time to exercises designed to help them master 6th grade level computational skills .

Findings on Students' Perceptions of Grouping Practices

When the first ENLACE student, Gladys, was interviewed, we asked her if she knew how she was assigned to her language arts and math classes. In particular, she was asked to explain how it was that she had Mrs. Olsen for language arts and Mrs. Jacob for math. Gladys told us that students were tested at the beginning of the sixth grade school year; if they passed the test they were placed in the "high" language arts class and if they didn't, they stayed in the "low" class. She then explained that there was a similar procedure for math; students took a test and depending on whether they passed the test, they were placed in the "high" or "low" class. She informed us that Mrs. Jacobs taught the high math class and the low language arts, whereas Mrs. Olsen taught the high language arts class and the low math class. She then volunteered her own placement by telling us that she had Mrs. Olsen for language arts and Mrs. Jacobs for math, both of which were high placements.

When students were asked how they would have hypothetically determined students' placements for language arts during the sixth grade, Gladys responded by saying that she would have determined students' placements the same way the teachers had because she believed that students who needed to be challenged should not be given easy grammar in language arts. In math, she also said that she would have determined student's placement the same way teachers had. She felt that students who were already competent should move on to fractions and variables, whereas students who really needed help with their multiplication and division should be grouped in a separate class that would provide them with that support.

We were also interested in exploring what students knew about the placement criteria that were used to place them in the particular classes and whom they thought was responsible for determining their placements. When Gladys was asked how she thought it was decided whose class she would be in for the language arts, she mentioned that she thought that a high score on the test that was given to her at the beginning of the school year had determined her placement. She also thought that the writing assignments given to students in homeroom were used to determine her language arts placement. When she was asked about math, she thought that a test was also used to determine her placement in a high or low ability math class. In speaking with Gladys, we learned that she was aware that the teachers were responsible for assigning students to ability groups since they were the ones who graded the tests.

Aside from learning about how students thought they had been placed in different ability groups, we also explored what, if any, differences students perceived between the language arts classes as well as the math classes. When discussing the differences between the math classes, Gladys informed us that she was aware that students used different textbooks in the high and low classes. She believed that her teacher, Mrs. Jacob, used a 7th grade book and that Mrs. Olsen used a 6th grade book. She was also aware that students in these classes did different types of work. Her math class in particular, did more work with fractions and variables, while the other class worked on multiplication and division. In language arts, she thought that the work was really challenging in her class, while Mrs. Jacob's students were focused on doing easy grammar and vocabulary work. Furthermore, she knew that in Mrs. Jacobs's low

language arts class the students were tested on the same vocabulary words every week, whereas in the high ability class, Mrs. Olsen would randomly select words from the dictionary for their vocabulary tests. Gladys' was also keen on the different amounts of homework that was given to the language arts classes.

When Gladys was asked to describe the high language arts students in her class, she mentioned that "some of them were really boring because they were only focused on studying, other ones were really funny, other ones were really friendly, and other ones were really smart". The low language arts students in the other class were "lazy", they didn't pay attention in class, and based on they're inability to pay attention in class, had trouble completing their homework. In her high math class, "there were kids who were really hyper and girls that used to play around with boys, like I don't know like weird". She explained what she meant by weird by saying that "they used to hit them and boys would like grab them and stuff". She also mentioned that "some other girls were silent, really helpful, and friendly". She described the low math students in the other class by noting that "some of them really paid attention and some of them just goofed off and some of them were cheaters because they would copy off of someone else".

The second ENLACE student that was interviewed was Noel. As he explained how it was that some students had one language arts class and other students had another, he noted that "some students know how to speak more English and write better than others", in specific, the students in the lower language arts class knew less punctuation. When he was asked about the placement criteria that were used to place him in his language arts classes, he thought that students had taken a test at the end of 5th grade and

another test at the beginning of the 6th grade that were used to determine their placements. He mentioned that students who received a higher grade on the test went into the higher class and students who received lower grades went into the lower language arts class however, he was unable to indicate who was responsible for determining his placement. In regards to math, Noel thought that students were given a test at the end of 5th grade to determine their placement. He was also unsure about who it was that was responsible for determining students' placements.

Noel was asked to hypothetically explain how he would have determined students' placements for language arts during the sixth grade. He responded by saying that he would have given students a test because he thought that without testing them, they might be put into a class where they already knew the material. Similarly, he said that he would have determined student's math placements by testing them in order to determine where they should be placed. He did not want to make the mistake of placing students who had already mastered certain skills with other students who needed additional assistance.

Noel explained that the language arts classes were different because one language arts class was more advanced and received "harder homework". He also thought there was a difference in the kind of work that was done by the language arts classes because "we read different stories and worked on different things". The amount of work done by both language arts classes differed because the lower language arts class didn't get as much homework as the high class. In regards to math, Noel thought that the math classes were different because one math class "looked harder" and they were given "more

advanced math homework". The kind of work done by the math classes also differed; one focused on fractions, while the other focused on algebra.

Noel described the high language arts students in his class using words like "community" because students "helped each other". The low language arts students in the other class were "helpful" since students helped each other when they were done with their own work, upon teacher request. He gathered as much based on the fact that some students in the low language arts class were in his math class and he noticed that they helped others in math. Noel described the low math students in his class by saying; they were a "community", where students helped each other more than they did in his language arts class. The high math students in the other class were "smart" because "they were in the advanced one".

The third ENLACE student who was interviewed was Jesus. He explained how it was that some students switched to Mrs. Olsen's class, while others stayed with Mrs. Jacob for language arts or math, by noting that some students switched classes since "some people were smarter". When probed to say who he thought was smarter, the data suggests that he was in the process of figuring this out. What was evident from his response was that he made a distinction between "Mexicans" and "White guys", as well as which class the majority of students of either ethnicity were assigned to.

Jesus was asked to explain how he would have hypothetically determined students' placements for language arts during the sixth grade. He responded by saying that he would have done it the same way teachers had; by giving students "a little quiz". His rationale was that without a quiz, instruction would have been too easy for students

who needed to be taught higher skills. In regards to math, he noted that he would have given students a quiz as well, otherwise "it wouldn't be school" for the students who already knew particular content; they needed to be challenged.

When he was asked about the criteria he believed was used to place him in his language arts class, Jesus said that teachers had given students a test at the beginning of 6th grade to determine "where we were" and what class they should be placed in. He also believed that it was the teachers who were responsible for making placement decisions since "they grade the tests". In regards to placement criteria for math, he also mentioned that students were given a test at the beginning of 6th grade. He said that students were given a few minutes to complete a math test, which contained addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division problems, but "everything was mixed up" on the test. Jesus added, "I think they tried to challenge us, how many we can do". Student's placement depended on how many problems students completed and the number of problems that were correct. He also believed that teachers were responsible for determining student's curricular placements in math since they graded the math tests.

Jesus explained that the language arts classes were different because one language arts class was "harder" and "a little more advanced". When he spoke about the differences in the kind of work done by both language arts classes he said, "they had more stuff to do, they had harder stuff that we did". He also added that students in the high ability language arts spoke a "harder language, like different words". For example, he mentioned that both classes were tested on 15 words for their weekly vocabulary tests, but he noticed that the other class had "longer words and harder words". When we asked

about the differences between both math classes, Jesus said, "Mrs. Jacob's was a little bit more advanced. We were "one step up cause we had a different book like a little bit harder, they had the same one from last year". Furthermore, he thought that his math class was harder because they "had the sixth grade book". Jesus also mentioned that there were differences in the kind of work done by both math classes. For example, if students in the high ability math class worked on division, the low ability class worked on multiplication. He added that, "if we got pre-algebra, they got division".

Jesus described the low language arts students in his class by saying that "they were all Mexican, funny, and we all get along". The high language arts students in the other class were "more serious", "more focused", and "smarter than us". When he was asked to describe the high math students in his class he said they were "more serious" and "not playful". "They were most of all my friends" and "they were mostly Mexican" were the statements he made about the low math students in the other class.

The last ENLACE student that we interviewed was Carola. She explained how it was that she had Mrs. Jacob for language arts and Mrs. Olsen for math, by telling us that it "depends on the level you were in". She volunteered her placement in these classes by saying "I was like not in the highest, I was getting in the highest" for math. In regards to her language arts placement she said, "I was getting in the highest level, which I wasn't ready for the highest". She also mentioned that Mrs. Jacob's class had the highest level in math and Mrs. Olsen had the highest level in language arts.

Instead of explaining how she would have hypothetically determined student's placements during the sixth grade, Carola answered our question by describing how she

would have hypothetically organized instruction for students in language arts and math. For language arts she said, "I would do it all kids together, but I would give them different work". When she was probed to define what she meant by different work, she responded by saying, "like if the kids that just came from Mexico, I would give them easy work and for the other kids, I would give them hard work, but I would be paying more attention to the ones that just came from Mexico because they need more work in English". For math, she also said that she would have organized instruction "like all together" because "some kids that came from Mexico don't really know much math of here and I think that they shoulded began with them, teaching them times tables, addition, and subtraction and those kinds of..."

Carola said that she thought she had been placed in the low class because "my English wasn't that good", when she was asked about the criteria she believed was used to place her in language arts. She volunteered that at the start of the 5th grade, she was put into a classroom where her teacher only spoke English. Prior to 5th grade she had been with teachers who spoke Spanish. When asked about who she thought was responsible for determining her language arts placement, Carola said she thought both Mrs. Jacob and Mrs. Olsen had made the decision together. She said, "I think they just saw how we speak, they heard our English that wasn't that good. From that they decided to the kids that speak better English shoulded go to the highest level and the ones that didn't know that much they would go to the..." When asked about the criteria she believed was used to determine her math placement, Carola said, "they took us a test", she added, "they give us hard problems and the ones that got the most was passed to a

highest one and the ones that didn't, passed to the lowest". She also thought that it was the teachers who decided student's curricular placements for math.

She explained that the language arts classes were different because, "one language arts class was more advanced in their language and they gave them more hard homework". In particular, the level of work done by both language arts classes was different because "they gave us vocabulary words and the other kids had it more difficult words"—Mrs. Olsen's class. When Carola was asked about the differences in the curriculum for both math classes she said, the "other class was way advanced", "they know more math than us", and "they were more higher"

Carola described the low language arts students in her class, using the words "I would say they tried their best, they made a lot of effort in their work, they continued trying all of their best, they were very nice persons with everyone, they respect each other. The high language arts students in the other class "always tell us bad things". Carola described the low math students in her class with the following statement, "they all were different, they all tried their best, almost everyone did their work, they didn't try their best on their test, they didn't did like nice work"—by nice work, she meant neat work. Similarly, the high math students in the other class "always tell us bad things".

Summary of Teacher Findings and Comparison of Findings on Students' Perceptions of Grouping Practices

In examining our data, we found that teachers took up the state policy context, which emphasizes school accountability and standards based instruction, by focusing their attention on meeting individual student needs. One way to calibrate the

relationship between standards based instruction and diverse student characteristics is through ability grouping. Our findings suggest that these teachers used ability grouping practices specifically for this reason. We also found that the teachers worked under the assumptions typically used to support the homogenous grouping of students, a finding that is consistent with previous research done on instructional grouping practices (Oakes, 1985). For example, these two teachers mentioned that it was easier for them to accommodate individual differences in homogenous groups, that is, groups of similar students were easier to teach and manage, both in language arts and in math. In math in particular, teachers reported that students could not advance if they did had not mastered the basic computational skills mastered necessary for doing higher order math problems. We can infer that teachers believed that students who had already developed solid computational skills should be placed in a high ability class where they could receive more challenging curriculum. Students who had not yet mastered these skills on the other hand should be instructed separately where they could review this material so that they could improve their basic computational skills.

Our goal in interviewing the teachers was to gather information about their organization of instruction (i.e. teaching practices, classroom instruction, and ability grouping practices) primarily to compare student's perceptions of their learning environments. Teachers in these two classrooms mentioned that their intent was to help all students achieve the 6th grade content standards. The data would suggest however that the learning opportunities offered to the students in the low ability classes were different from those offered to high ability students as a consequence of the ways in which

classrooms were organized, instruction was delivered, and expectations were held of student's abilities to do certain types of work, a finding consistent with the work of Moll et al., (1997). For example, students in the low ability math and language arts classes received a lower quality of instruction than the students in the high ability classes, a finding consistent with previous research (Oakes, 1982; Slavin and Braddock, 1992). This appears to be an inherent contradiction of state and school district goals and the student achievement outcomes that are possible given the varying quality of instruction that was offered in these classes. Viewing this classroom context through a sociocultural perspective allows us to see how students' learning opportunities and opportunities to display competence and mastery of specific academic skills were influenced by their situated learning context.

In math for example, the low ability class learning context was different from the high ability class. It was perceived that students in the low ability class had not yet developed the basic computational skills necessary to do high order math. This was confounded by the fact that observed student language limitations affected teachers' instruction as they helped students to master basic computational skills. On the other hand, the high ability students had already mastered these basic computational skills, which allowed them to move at a faster pace and participate in more enrichment activities—more fun stuff, since they did not have to review basic computational skills.

Teacher's perceptions played into the rationale they used for selecting textbooks for math instruction. Teachers reported saying that the high ability class textbook was "more difficult to understand" and that "there were definite differences between the two.

The high math class textbook "looks like a middle school or high school book just the way it looks and is set up. It definitely does a much better way of setting up, of providing more problems, challenges like more extensions, but it's also a lot harder for second language learners to understand". The low ability math textbook on the other hand, was "definitely easier to understand, there is definite universal access as far being more comprehensible for many more students, but then it also doesn't have much of a challenge".

Our data also suggests that the low ability math teacher observed patterns in math instruction for her second language learners. For instance, she said "I am finding that my math instruction with these kids is more language instruction than anything else". She also notes that her "second language kids are not necessarily poor in math so much as they just don't understand what their supposed to do". She found that she had to modify instruction for second language learners by defining words such as factor, multiple, and exponent, before students could do the computational skills associated with these use these operations.

The situated learning context in language arts was also different for students, particularly for the lower ability class. As found by Moll et al. (1997), we learned that teachers emphasized basic language skills such as grammar, sentence structure, and reading comprehension, rather than critical thinking and abstract reasoning as was emphasized in the high ability class. It appears that teachers intended to meet individual student's needs by adapting instruction according to their perceptions of student abilities. For example, one teacher reported that the work for the lower ability language arts class

was different from the high ability language arts class, although they were both working from the state content standards for the 6th grade. For example, the low ability language arts teacher mentioned that in any teacher's guide there could be sixteen skills per story, yet she chose to teach her students those literary skills that were "not quite so abstract". The high ability class on the other hand had the opportunity to focus on abstract literary techniques like hyperbole.

In turning our attention to how students perceived teacher's ability grouping practices and how the situated learning context influenced student's sense of self, self regulation theories serve as a tool for interpreting our data. In this case, student's perceptions of how they measured their competency and that of others are related to opportunities to learn in a situated context. We found that students in this study developed cultural models for their experiences in language arts and math ability groups during their 6th grade year (Durán, in preparation). They articulated these cultural models by demonstrating awareness of classroom grouping practices, placement criteria, class levels, and different curriculum practices that were delivered to the language arts and math classes.

Student's perceptions of the two ability grouped math classes involved articulating their observations of the different textbooks that were used by the high and low classes. Some of the high ability math students mentioned that the low ability class used a book from the previous year, thereby assuming that the book was a fifth grade level textbook. However, both teachers confirmed that the textbooks used for both math classes were adopted by the district for the 6th grade. As a consequence, high ability

math students developed the perception that the low ability class was not performing at grade level. All four of the ENLACE students noticed that the high and low classes covered different mathematical operations based on the books that they worked from. As a result, low ability students assumed that the high ability students were on track, smarter, and more advanced. By articulating these differences, it appears that students recognized that the different textbooks that were used allowed them to do different types of work in the different ability groups they had been assigned to. In effect students in the low and high ability grouped classrooms were operating from very different cultural models for the operation of the classroom.

On a similar note, student's perceptions of language arts practices followed a similar trend. Students in the low ability class articulated that their teacher repeatedly assigned them the same vocabulary words, yet all four students mentioned that high ability students were assigned harder words on their spelling tests as well as different words to help them expand their vocabulary skills. Low ability students also mentioned that students in the high ability class read different stories, they got more homework, and they had "more stuff" to do, like taking more tests. We gathered that regardless of student placement in a low or high ability class, all students recognized that the high ability class was harder and more challenging. Once again students articulated that there were differences in the subject matter covered by the two language arts classes.

Students in the low ability classroom had very different self-regulation demands placed on them than students in the high ability classroom. Our findings suggest that student's perceptions of the nature of classroom practices and the self-regulation required

to enact practices influenced the ways in which they saw their peers, those who are like them (i.e. classmates in the same ability group) and those who are not (i.e. classmates who were not in their own ability groups). For example, students in the high ability language arts and math classes developed perceptions and attached a variety of labels to students in the low ability groups such as lazy, cheaters, not paying attention, "all of my friends" and "mostly Mexican". On the other hand, students in the low ability groups developed perceptions of the high ability groups and attached labels to them such as more focused and serious, smart, did not speak, not playful, and "always said bad things" to the low ability group students.

Based on these meaningful characteristics and labels created for each other, it appears that the situated context of classroom instruction, as it was organized in high ability and low ability classes, gave some students the impression that the high ability students were more academically oriented and that the low ability students were not good students. We also found that students with low ability placements in either language arts or math had a more critical view of the way in which their peers perceived their competency. For instance, students described their high ability peers by noting that they sometimes called them "dumb" because of their placement in a low ability class. Another student also mentioned that he observed that Mexican students tended to be assigned to the low ability language arts and math classes. From this we can infer that students were critical about ability grouping practices and that they created perceptions that went along with what they were told by others as well as from what they experienced

in these situated contexts. Students were learning to self-regulate very differently in low vs. high ability classrooms.

It is also interesting to note, that the majority of our ENLACE students, regardless of language arts or math placements, did not question the ways in which they were assigned to instructional groups, nor did they question the practice of grouping itself. Instead, they perceived their assignment to be based on the competency they demonstrated on language arts and math tests or on their classroom performance. The only student who objected to teacher's practices of between class grouping was Carola, who had a low placement in both language arts and math. We gathered that she disliked the practice because of the stigma that was attached to her low placements. She reported that the high ability students in the other language arts and math classes told her "bad things" because she had low placements. In spite of her dislike for teacher's instructional grouping practices, Carola still believed that her placement was a consequence of her inability to master language arts and math subject matter, rather than questioning whether her placement was unjust or inappropriate. These data suggest that the notion of meritocracy is so deeply embedded in student's cultural models about what it means to be a competent student, that they did not question the institution, its structure or its practices. Instead, they questioned their own abilities, or lack thereof, to demonstrate their academic competency and assumed responsibility for their placements in the language arts and math ability groups (Oakes, 1982b; 1985).

Discussion

Educational or Scientific Importance of the Study and Challenges

Putatively, one of the arguments supporting the practice of grouping students homogenously is that it simplifies teacher's instruction of students of varying ability levels (Oakes, 1985). Similarly, some proponents of this practice argue that homogenous ability grouping is sensitive to the various abilities of students, often making them feel more comfortable to receive instruction with students who are at their same level (Oakes, 1985). This line of work uses past research, which has focused on ability grouping practices and student achievement outcomes, as a stepping-stone to further explore how students perceived these grouping practices in their situated learning environments.

Our preliminary findings indicate that although ability grouping may be deemed useful for instruction from the point of view of educators, students' perceptions of such practices form a differing and often-times disadvantageous perspective, which influences their sense of self. Furthermore, such student perceptions may more negatively impact students from limited English proficient backgrounds. We identify some of student's perceptions regarding their placement in particular ability groups and the practices that take place in these groups, some of which may be either unfavorable or encouraging to their sense of self in academic contexts. Students were learning to self-regulate very differently in low vs. high ability classrooms. Both high and low ability students operated from a cultural model for the classroom that lead them to assume that student performance in high ability classrooms needed to meet more demanding standards and self-accountability than in low ability classrooms. As Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran, and Yeager (2000) have noted, there is a connection between student's self-expectations across the school year, and one can argue that this extends across school years as well.

A limitation of this study is that it is not generalizable for policy use since it involves case study methodology and not a large cohort of respondents. It is important to note however, that rich and in depth information was obtained from our casing of students that couldn't otherwise be gathered from a study utilizing a large sample and quantitative methodology. Another limitation of this work is that our data was derived solely from teacher and student interviews and not from analyses of observed classroom practices. Our findings should be interpreted with caution since we did not provide information about the achievement outcomes of our ENLACE students regarding their performance in language arts and math and therefore can not speculate about how student's experiences in their language arts and math ability groups influenced their achievement in these subject areas.

It is our hope that with further research we will be able to better understand and provide intervention for those students who have begun to perceive their sense of self pessimistically by conducting observations of classroom practices to better align students perceptions with what occurs in a classroom setting. Further research in this area could likely have a positive impact for students with a poor sense of self in an academic context, considering that they will face more apparent grouping practices that will gear them toward either a general or college bound curriculum as they transition into junior high and high school. It is possible that with further research in this area, findings will be able to affect school-centered systemic change that supports academic achievement for all Latino students.

Appendix: Demographic and Placement Characteristics of ENLACE Students

	Gladys	***Nestor***	***Jesus***	***Carola***
Curricular Placement	Math: High Language arts: High	Math: Low Language arts: High	Math: High Language arts: Low	Math: Low Language arts: Low
Years Attended Magdalena Elementary	3 years	3 years	7 years	7 years
Last Educational Level Completed by Parents	Father: Began the University, but did not finish Mother: Completed equivalent to third year of high school	Father: Completed equivalent to high school Mother: Completed equivalent to elementary	Father: Completed equivalent to elementary Mother: Completed equivalent to elementary	Father: Completed equivalent to 6th grade Mother: Completed equivalent to 5th grade
Parent Occupations	Father: Cook Mother: Homemaker	Father: Gardener Mother: Homemaker	Father: Gardener Mother: House keeper	Father: Gardener Mother: Homemaker
Socio Economic Background: Free or Reduced Lunch Program	Free	Free	Free	Free
Student Language Classification	Early advanced English learner	Intermediate English learner	Intermediate English learner	Early Intermediate English Learner
Student Stanford 9 (9th Ed.) Percentile Scores	Reading: 44 Math: 78 Language: 69 Spelling: 19	Reading: 36 Math: 42 Language: 11 Spelling: 33	Reading: 8 Math: 12 Language: 9 Spelling: 11	Reading: 4 Math: 4 Language: 11 Spelling: 1

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I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: LATINO 6th GRADE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SORTING PRACTICES

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Publication Date: NONE

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